



Gypsy Moth Q & A

Q: Where did gypsy moths come from?

A: The gypsy moth was brought to North America by Professor L. Trouvelot when he tried to breed a hardy silkworm. Between 1868 and 1869 some gypsy moths escaped when a specimen jar fell from Trouvelot's open window. Later, more moths and caterpillars escaped from small populations growing on shrubs in Trouvelot's garden when high winds blew off protective netting. The professor notified townspeople about the accidents, but nobody thought the gypsy moth was a pest and no one captured or destroyed the escaped insects. The insects soon multiplied in a vacant lot next to Trouvelot's home in Medford Massachusetts.

Gypsy Moths. By the early 1900s, feeding upon many tree species in the Northeast, and with no natural predators, they had spread to eastern New York and New Jersey. By 1981 the species had traveled west through 46 counties in Pennsylvania; that same year they stripped millions of trees and vines in 800,000 acres of New Jersey.

Q: How destructive is the gypsy moth?

A: The gypsy moth, in its caterpillar stage, is the most destructive hardwood defoliator ever to occur in New Jersey. Each year, since 1970, gypsy moth caterpillars have caused varying degrees of defoliation (leaf loss) between 1,910 - 800,000 acres of forest land. Study plots established in repeatedly defoliated forests show oak tree mortality varying between 15 to 65 percent.

Q: Why is gypsy moth such a concern?

A: Gypsy moth caterpillars are ferocious eaters. One caterpillar can eat up to one square meter of vegetation during its development. When these caterpillars congregate on trees, they can eat all the leaves on an adult tree in a matter of days, leaving that tree weak and susceptible to diseases and other insects. In northeastern states, gypsy moth caterpillars have been known to defoliate entire forests. When gypsy moth becomes established, property values can decrease, large sums of money are spent by state and federal governments to control it, and much of the beauty of the natural forested landscape is threatened or lost.

Q: What do gypsy moth caterpillars like to feed on? How can I be sure I am not mistaking gypsy moth for some other plant pest?

A: The gypsy moth feeds on a wide variety of trees, which include oak, maple, birch, beech, willow, and hickory. The larger caterpillars also have been known to feed on pine, spruce, hemlock and many common ornamentals. Trees that are rarely attacked by the gypsy moth larvae include tulip poplar, ash, dogwood, rhododendron and cedar. In New Jersey, because of their time of caterpillar occurrence and feeding habits, gypsy moth is most often mistaken for the Eastern tent caterpillar.

Q: What causes increases and decreases in gypsy moth populations?

A: The gypsy moth first began defoliating New Jersey forests in 1966. Three major population cycles have occurred, one in 1972 when 256,000 acres were defoliated, another in 1981 when 798,000 acres were defoliated, and another in 1990 when 431,000 acres were defoliated.

A cycle is completed when after years of steady build-up, the larval populations peak and dramatically crash the following season. This is caused by starvation, along with fungal and viral outbreaks, which have reduced populations from 80 to 90 percent in certain areas. Parasites and predators also help to keep gypsy moth populations at low levels in conjunction with these fungal and viral outbreaks. These periods of stable low gypsy moth populations may last for five years or more.

Q: Can gypsy moths cause an allergic reaction?

Some people are dermally allergic to the caterpillars. The urticating hairs cause skin rashes on some humans. This is most noticeable in May when larvae are small. Children appear to be more prone to this problem than adults.

Gypsy Moth - Caterpillar on leaves



Gypsy Moth - Photos courtesy of USDA/USFS

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